NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-6213
CHRIS KERN

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CITIZENSHIP FOR PRESIDENT DAVIS

ANNCR:

THE U.S. CONGRESS HAS PASSED, AND PRESIDENT CARTER SIGNED, A BILL RESTORING THE CITIZENSHIP OF JEFFERSON DAVIS, THE LONG-DEAD PRESIDENT OF THE SECESSIONIST SOUTHERN STATES DURING THE 19TH CENTURY AMERICAN CIVIL WAR. CHRIS KERN HAS A BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

THE BILL TO RESTORE THE CITIZENSHIP OF JEFFERSON DAVIS PASSED THROUGH CONGRESS ALMOST UNNOTICED. THE NEWS THAT PRESIDENT CARTER HAS SIGNED IT WAS REPORTED IN BRIEF STORIES THAT WERE BURIED DEEP INSIDE MOST MAJOR NEWSPAPERS.

JEFFERSONS DAVIS WASN'T ALWAYS SO UNCONTROVERSIAL.

A LITTLE OVER A HUNDRED YEARS AGO, U.S. GOVERNMENT SOLDIERS MARCHED TO A SONG THAT WENT IN PART, "WE'LL HANG JEFF DAVIS TO A SOUR APPLE TREE." BUT DAVIS ALSO HAD HIS ADMIRERS. PRIME MINISTER WILLIAM GLADSTONE OF GREAT BRITAIN SAID OF HIM: "HE HAS MADE AN ARMY. HE HAS MADE A NAVY. AND, MORE THAN THAT, HE HAS MADE A NATION."

THE CIVIL WAR BETWEEN THE NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN STATES THAT TOOK PLACE IN THIS COUNTRY IN THE 1860'S WAS ONE OF THE BLOODIEST CONFLICTS IN AMERICAN HISTORY. FOR THE SOUTHERN STATES THAT WERE TRYING TO SECEDE FROM THE NATIONAL UNION, IT WAS A LOST CAUSE FROM THE START. THEY HAD ABOUT NINE MILLION PEOPLE, COMPARED WITH ALMOST TWENTY-TWO MILLION IN THE NORTH. AND AMONG THOSE NINE MILLION WERE THE BLACK SLAVES WHOSE VERY STATUS AS SLAVES WAS ONE OF THE MAIN ISSUES IN THE WAR.

BUT WHAT REALLY LOST THE WAR FOR THE SOUTH WAS THE REGION'S WAY OF LIFE -- SOMETHING THE SOUTHERN PATRIOTS WERE FIGHTING TO DEFEND. IT WAS AN AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY, DOMINATED BY THE BIG PLANTATIONS THAT NEEDED SLAVES FOR LABOR. THE NORTHERN STATES HAD THE INDUSTRY, AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR -- LIKE OTHER WARS ELSEWHERE THAT WERE TO FOLLOW IT -- WAS A WAR OF MATERIEL AS MUCH AS A WAR BETWEEN MEN.

BUT FOR JEFFERSON DAVIS, IT WAS A CAUSE -- A CAUSE THAT MANY OF THE CONGRESSMEN WHO VOTED TO RESTORE HIS CITIZENSHIP WOULD BE QUICK TO REPUDIATE TODAY. DAVIS WAS AN UNAPOLOGETIC RACIST. HE BELIEVED THE BLACK SLAVES WERE MEMBERS OF AN INFERIOR RACE, THAT THEY WERE CONTENT IN SLAVERY, THAT THEIR SUBJUGATION TO THEIR WHITE MASTERS WAS ORDAINED BY GOD.

HE WAS ALSO A SOUTHERN PATRIOT TO AN EXTENT THAT EVEN SOME OF HIS FELLOW SECESSIONISTS MUST HAVE FOUND EXCESSIVE. DAVIS WAS A MAN WHO COULD DISMISS NORTHERNER BENJAMIN FRANKLIN -- A HERO OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION AND ONE OF THE MOST EMINENT SCIENTISTS AND DIPLOMATS OF THE 18TH CENTURY -- AS "THE INCARNATION OF THE PEDDLING, TUPPENNY YANKEE."

THEY NEVER DID HANG JEFF DAVIS TO A SOUR APPLE TREE, BUT WHEN THE WAR WAS OVER THEY ACCUSED HIM OF TREASON AND STRIPPED HIM OF HIS CITIZENSHIP. DAVIS LIVED TO A RIPE OLD AGE, DEVOTING MUCH OF HIS ENERGY TO DEFENDING THE REBELLION HE LED. AND HE FARED FOR BETTER THAN THE WAY OF LIFE HE HAD FOUGHT A CIVIL WAR TO PRESERVE. THE SLAVES WERE FREED, THE BIG PLANTATIONS BROKEN UP, AND THE ECONOMY AND POLITICS OF THE SOUTH STILL BEAR THE SCARS OF THAT WAR TODAY.

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WJL/RD